

Senior Convocation, May 5, 2005

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Liberty and Liberal Education: The Work of Wisdom¹

In these busy days, filled with the compulsion of final papers and onerous exams, it seems fitting to turn our minds to the noble pursuit of liberty, the very purpose of these past four years of hard labor.

As Seneca wrote in classical times, “Only one study is truly liberal: that which gives a person his liberty. It is the study of wisdom, and that is lofty, brave, and great-souled.”

Tocqueville too shows that liberty is dependent on wisdom. For Tocqueville, that liberally educated Frenchman who came to understand deeply American democracy, the “art of freedom”² depends on the “contemplation of first causes” (438). He even concludes his two-volume study of America by pointing out the dangers to liberty posed by “false and cowardly” ideas such as the opinions

that peoples are never masters of themselves here below, and that they necessarily obey who knows what insurmountable and unintelligent force that arises from prior circumstances, of race, of soil, or of climate.

Those are false and cowardly doctrines that can never produce any but weak individuals and pusillanimous nations: Providence...traces around each man, it is true, a fateful circle from which he cannot leave, but within these vast limits, man is powerful and free; so too are peoples.

According to Tocqueville, and the tradition he represents, human beings can be masters of themselves, regardless of that fateful circle of circumstance in which each one lives. He is clear about the role that ideas play in ruling nations and in the self-rule of individuals: false and cowardly ideas lead to slavery, misery, and even barbarism; wisdom leads to freedom, prosperity, and peace.

The University of Dallas affirms this same vision, expressed by our motto, “Love ye truth and justice.” This motto is taken from the Book of Zacharia where God assures his people that, despite their present poverty and hardship, they will achieve peace, prosperity, and joy if “ye but love truth and justice.” Knowing the true and the just is not enough, however; one must love them and freely pursue them.

Socrates also taught us that the unjust and “unexamined life is not worth living” and he freely³ pursued the just and examined life until the moment of his death. John Cardinal Newman explained the same lasting and transformative character of this way of life when he defined a liberal education as “a habit of mind...which lasts through life, of which the attributes are: freedom, [fairness], calmness, moderation, and wisdom” – stressing like Socrates that wisdom is the work of one’s whole life.

Because wisdom involves the never-ending labor of hard-won self-knowledge in ever

¹ Dedicated to Dr. John E. Paynter (Nov. 30, 1938-Apr. 26, 2005), UD provost and professor. All references to Tocqueville in this essay were discussed in a 2003 reading group with Jack Paynter, who considered this “art of liberty” to be one of the major preoccupations of the work.

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Trans., ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Wnthrop (U of Chicago P, 2000), 229, 274, 278, 340. All other references to Tocqueville refer to this edition although some adjustments to translation are made.

³ In the last months of his life, Dr. Paynter referred several times to Socrates’ statement in the *Republic* that “no forced study abides in a soul” (536e).

new and unexpected circumstances, we can understand why, in their final works, both Shakespeare and Milton gave privileged place to the greatness of patience, that unsung strength that allows time to complete what we cannot and should not. Coming from the Latin root for suffering, patience, for Milton, is the great epic virtue needed for liberty, for we must be willing to suffer for what we know is true. As he put it at the end of *Paradise Lost*, “suffering for Truth’s sake / Is fortitude to highest victory” (12. 569-70).

This love for truth and justice, this patient work of wisdom requires the habitual contemplation of first causes, or most practically put, it requires habitual attention to conscience.⁴ What happens when one does not cultivate a love for truth, in conscience, was expressed most dramatically by Albert Speer, a member of Hitler’s inner circle. In his best-selling book, *Inside the Third Reich*, written after the Nuremberg Trials and after twenty years in prison, he explained:

During the twenty years I spent in Spandau prison, I often asked myself what I would have done if I had recognized Hitler’s real face and the true nature of the regime he had established. The answer was banal and dispiriting: My position as Hitler’s architect had soon become indispensable to me. Not yet thirty, I saw before me the most exciting prospects an architect can dream of.

Moreover, the intensity with which I went at my work repressed problems that I ought to have faced. A good many perplexities were smothered by my daily rush. In writing these memoirs I became increasingly astonished to realize that before 1944 I so rarely -- in fact almost never -- found the time to reflect upon myself or my own activities, that I never gave my own existence a thought.⁵

What was a challenge to Albert Speer in the 1930’s is the challenge that every human being faces in some form at some time to some degree in his or her own life: the temptation of unthoughtful immersion in day-to-day pressures, rather than the patient attention to wisdom.

As Tocqueville explained this same danger, right after indicating that civilizations die without “the contemplation of first causes,” the “lights that enlighten us” are not extinguished all at once. The loss of principles occurs “little by little and as if by themselves” (438) – just by allowing ourselves to be unthoughtfully caught up in the rush of day-to-day business.

To illustrate these points, let’s turn our imagination to the time of the English Renaissance, a period of history as promising and perplexing as our own: a time when foundational ideas were being re-examined and dreams of reformation were bursting into violent action.

Caught in a fateful circle of circumstance that brought him to the highest office of the land from which he would resign – for what even the members of his family called a “foolish scruple of conscience” – was the liberally educated Thomas More, known in his own day as the “Christian Socrates.”⁶

As a youth, More prepared himself carefully for his life’s work. Right after completing law school at 24, More took up and mastered Greek to give himself access to the books you have studied in the Core. For the next seventeen years, More continued these studies early in the morning, while during the day he gained experience in the practical workings of his profession. He did not accept a prestigious position in the Court of Henry VIII during these beginning years of his career, because he knew he was not prepared to do so. Instead, he devoted to his young

⁴ For examples of Tocqueville’s use of conscience see pages 594 and 599.

⁵ Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, Tran. Richard and Clara Winston (Avon, 1971), 64.

⁶ *Thomas More Source Book* (Catholic UP of America, 2004), xiv.

family the time they required in justice, and he practiced law by serving as an unglamorous city attorney and working on public projects such as the construction of urgently needed sewers to control the ever-flooding Thames River. By the time More accepted a position at King Henry's court, he brought an immense competence.

But before accepting that position at age 41, and again before accepting the highest office of the land at age 52, More set one condition: that the King respect his conscience. Imagine the King's surprise that a subject would be so bold as to make such an unflattering and uncompromising request. Yet, as More reported years later, the King responded by giving the "most virtuous lesson that ever prince taught his servant": look first to God and conscience, and then to your king.⁷

Attention to conscience requires a great deal of reflection and training if it is to be done well and with accuracy, as you have learned here, and as More showed in his own life. Not only did More study in earnest before entering national politics, but More said that he spent another seven years carefully studying the specific issues that would lead to his resignation, imprisonment, and death.

Setting aside all the political issues involved, consider the liberty this man achieved and maintained, regardless of his fateful circle of circumstance. Here was a person willing to lose all he had – his life, his family, his high office, his Great House, and (hardest of all after his family) his reputation – for a matter of conscience. And he gave up all, not only with calm but with good humor, right up to the final moments of his life. During his last year in prison, More repeated often the merry quip that "a man may lose his head and have no harm."⁸ Then, right after his emotionally explosive trial, he said with good cheer to the fifteen judges who condemned him and who had been his colleagues and friends for decades, that he hoped "we may yet hereafter, in heaven meet all merrily together."⁹ And during the last hour of his life, he joked with his jailer, then with his guard, and then with his executioner.

After 15 months in a damp, cold cell right next to the Thames River and directly over the Tower of London's smelly and stagnant moat; in a cell so cold that ice formed on its walls since there was no glass in the arrow-slits that served as windows; after 15 months in such conditions, in isolation, while suffering kidney stones and severe chest pains and debilitating leg cramps, More's health was eventually so broken that he could not walk by himself up the stairs of the scaffold. So he quipped to his guard at the bottom of the stairs, If you help me up, I'll get myself down.¹⁰ And when he got to the top, More placed his head on the chopping block, after carefully moving his long beard out of the way, quipping to the executioner: don't cut my beard; it was not found guilty of treason.¹¹

To discover the cause of the serene and friendly good cheer that More freely showed to those around him, even during the height of his greatest sufferings, consider the puzzling last line of the last prayer he wrote in the few days between his trial and his execution. That last prayer is: "The things good Lord that I pray for, give me thy grace to labor for."¹² Now what labor was left for More in those last hours of life? Hadn't he finished his life's work? Hadn't he conquered, in conscience?

⁷ *TMSB*, 357-8.

⁸ *TMSB*, 213, 333, 348.

⁹ *TMSB*, 61; also 212, 335.

¹⁰ *TMSB*, 154.

¹¹ *TMSB*, 155.

¹² Thomas More, *Sadness of Christ and Final Prayers and Instructions* (Scepter P, 1993), 155.

To understand that labor, we must reflect upon the demanding work of not “murmuring” – one of the most practical and important requirements of human liberty. Murmuring or giving into internal complaints is, after all, the result of those fond fantasies of pride we all can create. Being free, we all tend to judge the world by personal desire and not by the heroic demands of duty. And realist that he was, More pointed out that murmuring will produce the greatest of harms. The example he uses repeatedly is King Saul, whom More seems to present as an archetypal figure that shows what will happen to any good person who does not diligently use right reason to rule the imagination and desire.¹³

Saul, as you know, loved God deeply and was specially created and called and anointed to be the first king of God’s Chosen People. Yet by the end of his life, Saul turned from God, looked to witches for advice, and ended up losing his kingship because of his infidelities. What happened? As More reflects upon this story, he indicates that it all started with Saul’s giving in to weariness and fear, shown in his rebellious interior complaints about the difficulties and uncertainties of his own life. By allowing himself to indulge in such impatience, Saul fell from interior complaint to outward negligence and then from outward negligence to outright rebellion against his deepest Love and strongest convictions.

We can compare Saul’s attitude towards difficulties, with the words that More spoke to his daughter when, for the third time, she tried to convince her father to come out of prison by going against his conscience. After teasing Meg for playing “mistress Eve...come [to] tempt your father,”¹⁴ More calmly and reassuringly said to Margaret:

Nothing can come except what God wills. And I make me very sure that whatsoever that be, even if nothing has ever appeared so bad, it shall indeed be the best.¹⁵

Notice the careful choice of words: “I *make* me very sure.” More knew that he was free: free to live in accord with his deepest convictions, or free to fall from the patience required by those convictions; free to love truth and justice, or free to neglect them; free to “lose one’s head and have no harm,” or free not to.

Those astonishing words “I *make* me very sure...” show that More was exercising his freedom to choose his response to adversity, in the light of a conscience formed by his deepest convictions and patiently fostered by an ever deepening love for truth and justice.

Do you see now why and how More labored to the last moment of his life? He labored to remain faithful to wisdom, thus calling to mind those powerful poetic lines from the Book of Wisdom:

Resplendent and unfading is Wisdom.... I preferred her to scepter and throne, and deemed riches nothing in comparison to her.... Beyond health and comeliness I loved her and I chose to have her rather than light, because her radiance never ceases. Yet all good things came to me in her company, and countless riches at her hands; and I rejoiced in them all, because Wisdom is their leader.... (6:12, 7:7-12)

Liberty and liberal education are the work of wisdom. As you leave UD, may wisdom abide as your greatest love. May you renew and advance the civilization you inherit; may you bring peace and joy to those in your fated circle of circumstance; and may you remain masters of yourselves, wherever you serve.

¹³ *TMSB*, 213-14.

¹⁴ *TMSB*, 320.

¹⁵ *TMSB*, 335.